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**The Cinema Films Back: Colonialism, Alterity and Resistance in Chantal
Akerman's *La Folie Almayer***

Qui de nous n'a eu sa terre promise,
son jour d'extase et sa fin en exil?

Henri Frédéric Amiel

Adapting a great modernist writer like Joseph Conrad inevitably represents a challenge for filmmakers, particularly so in the wake of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a brilliant transposition of *Heart of Darkness* to the Vietnam war which set new standards for creatively revisiting a literary source. Belgian director Chantal Akerman, one of the great innovators of modern cinema and a tireless experimenter with filmic form, rises to the task with her last film to date, *La Folie Almayer* (2011), freely adapted from Conrad's eponymous debut novel. For Akerman, a quintessential *auteur* in the tradition of the *Nouvelle Vague*, the film constitutes the second foray into the terrain of adaptation after her acclaimed *La Captive* (2000) inspired by Proust, as well as a long-awaited return to feature film following a seven-year break devoted to documentary filmmaking and video art. Conrad's trenchant reflection on colonialism and its ills allows the director to return to and explore further some of the most pressing preoccupations of her filmic oeuvre: entrapment and obsession, a young woman's quest for emancipation and freedom, the fear of the Other, cultural alienation and eroded identities. Under Akerman's camera, Conrad's 1896 novel takes on the wider traits of an existential tragedy where personal and racial conflicts are played out in an avant-garde film language that, in turn, refuses to be colonised by the mainstream. The dissociated editing style, temporal distortions, expressive sound track, as well as the stylised dialogue and theatrical mise-en-scène characteristic of Akerman's signature style give visual and aural form to the self-destructive delusions of the male protagonist and the fraught racial and cultural encounters in societies obsessed with difference and superiority. Engaging in a "minor cinema", that is, an art form that consciously embraces its own marginality, rebels against the dominance of big production systems and makes exile one of its

central themes, the director creates what Jean-Michel Frodon, in the context of one of her experimental documentaries, has called “une forme qui pense”.¹ After a brief survey of Conrad’s critique of colonial discourse, this article will first of all explore how the adaptation rewrites and updates the novel before examining its avant-garde style as a cinematic strategy of resistance concomitant with Conrad’s interrogation of the colonial project.

Long accused of being complicit with imperialism or, at least, of denying the colonised subject’s subjectivity and agency, Conrad’s East Asian and African works have recently been reappraised from postcolonial and Third World perspectives which highlight the author’s deeply distrustful view of the colonialist enterprise and complex negotiation of cultural and racial difference.² As a victim of Russian imperialism (the five-year old Conrad accompanied his parents into exile after his father was deported as a result of his involvement in the Polish struggle for independence), the Polish-born, British naturalised author was particularly sensitised to the injustices of political annexation and expansion. Although, as Andrea White points out, Conrad initially held conservative sympathies, he never simply committed to an “English view” of imperialism as some critics and fellow writers would have it.³ Rather, in works like *Almayer’s Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, “Heart of Darkness”, *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*, he persistently questions the Victorian discourses of Western cultural superiority that served to legitimise the colonial project. During his extensive travels as a captain working in the British Merchant Service, Conrad had witnessed with his own eyes the more brutal, unspoken realities of colonialism, being struck by the flagrant disparity between, on the one hand, the elevating rhetoric of Europe’s “civilising mission” and, on the other, the economically and politically driven exploitation of indigenous people and resources. Already in his first novel, *Almayer’s*

¹ Jean-Michel Frodon, “Guerre sans nom aux frontières de l’Amérique”, *Le Monde*, 26 May 2002.

² See for instance Christopher Gobwilt, *The Invention of the West. Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford University Press, 1995); Christopher Lane, “Almayer’s Defeat: The Trauma of Colonialism in Conrad’s Early Work”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 32-3 (1999), 401-428; Andrea White, “Conrad and Imperialism”, in J.H. Stape (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Harry Sewlall, “Postcolonial/Postmodern Spatiality in *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*”, *Conradiana*, 38-1 (2006), 79-93.

³ See White, p. 181. Chinua Achebe qualifies Conrad as a “bloody racist” in “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’”, *Massachusetts Review*, 17-4 (1977), 782-794.

Folly (1895), he interrogates contemporary distinctions between Western “civilisation” and the purported “barbarism” of indigenous populations, insisting instead on the inherent cultural and psychological similarities between coloniser and colonised. In the words of White:

No one group is idealized; rather our sense is of a succession of displacements and power struggles, internally and externally fuelled by a common human greed. It is a world of multiple viewpoints, rich and historic, not the homogenous, self-congratulatory story of unenlightened, backward “them” and heroic, progressive “us”.⁴

In stark contrast to the colonial myth of white man’s noble struggle to civilise the “dark corners” of the globe, Conrad puts at the centre of his novel a distinctly unpatriotic and despondent Indies-born trader, who idles his days away in a forlorn jungle outpost dreaming of an imaginary Europe in which he has never set foot. When the financial promises which lured him into marrying the Malay adoptive daughter of an English trader come to nothing, Kaspar Almayer clings on to his dream of finding gold to “purchase back” his social status and secure a better existence for him and his mixed-blood daughter Nina. His final defeat both as a father and a white, colonial subject comes when Nina elopes with the Malay prince cum anti-colonial fighter Dain Maroola. The eponymous “folly” of the book’s title not only refers, in the parlance of the locals, to the house that Almayer has built at the prospect of an English colonial presence that never materialises, but, more profoundly, to his self-delusion, hubris and contempt for indigenous communities and their culture.⁵ In his obsessive, ambiguous attachment to his daughter and his refusal to grant her self-determination, the father figure becomes an allegory for the unilateral, possessive and belittling relations between Empire and its colonies.

True to her verdict that “[l]a lettre au cinéma n’est pas une excellente solution surtout lorsqu’il y a une adaptation littéraire en jeu. On ne peut pas s’inspirer du livre

⁴ White, pp. 187-188.

⁵ Daniel R. Schwarz interprets the “folly” of the title as Almayer’s effort to shape another human being, (that is, Nina) according to his whim. See *Conrad: Almayer’s Folly to Under Western Eyes* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 12.

sinon cela devient une sorte de bataille – perdue d’avance – contre la littérature”,⁶ Akerman shows little concern for historical and textual fidelity in her adaptation, privileging instead her own (as we will see autobiographically inspired) rewriting of the cultural, familial and racial tensions depicted by Conrad. As already in her adaptation of Proust which diluted the original setting (that is, the early years of the twentieth century) into a more fluid, stratified time evoking in turn the 1920s, 1950s and 1990s, here Conrad’s novel set at the apex of colonial expanse is transported into a diffuse twentieth century at the threshold between colonialism and independence, in other words, a period when the Western imperial project is fast coming to an end.⁷ The diegetic music – most prominently Dean Martin’s *Sway* whose languid mambo rhythms accompany the filmic prologue and title credits –, sets, costumes, and manners loosely point to the 1950s. Yet any more specific temporal and geographical anchoring is explicitly withheld: an inter-title after the prologue laconically announces an undefined “Avant Ailleurs”; the synopsis for the film loosely points to “[q]uelque part en Asie du Sud-Est au bord d’un fleuve tumultueux”.⁸ The anachronistic presence of modern cars and DVD stores in the scenes shot in Phnom Penh not only evinces the director’s disinterest in the accuracies that would be demanded by a period-style historical reconstruction, but displaces the film’s absolute vantage point into our own present from where Conrad’s investigation of colonialism and its discontents will be revisited. The choice of Cambodia rather than the original Borneo for the shooting, frequently multilingual (French, Khmer and English) dialogues, transformation of the Dutch Almayer into an exiled Frenchman longing for Paris, and casting of Stanislas Merhar (a French actor of Slovenian origin) and Aurore Marion (an actress of mixed Greek and African-Belgian descent), from the outset, posit the film’s transnational character and outlook. *La Folie Almayer*, like *La Captive* before it, resolutely refuses any appropriations into a genre (heritage film) or national canon (French or Belgian cinema). The adaptation transcends the geo-political specificities of the source text in favour of a broader meditation on exile, cultural and racial

⁶ Le Corre, Yves and Samir Ardjoum, “Entretien avec Chantal Akerman”, <http://www.fluctuat.net/cinema/interview/akerman2.htm>.

⁷ Joachim Lepostier, unlike me, considers that the film is set in our contemporary present “sans chercher, outre mesure une quelconque ‘transposition’ vers des mœurs plus contemporains”. “Fuite et piétinements”, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 675 (2012), 47-48 (p. 47).

⁸ DVD cover, *La Folie Almayer*, Shellac, 2013.

conflict as well as on the unbridgeable isolation of human beings – preoccupations that persistently haunt both Akerman's and Conrad's works.

The unconventional prologue that opens the film from the outset signals a distancing from the conventions of the heritage genre with its naturalist aesthetics aimed at creating the perfect illusion of a bygone era. *La Folie Almayer* begins like a thriller, even if the slow-paced rhythm and languor of the rest of the film – exemplary of Akerman's concern with cinematic time and duration – quickly undermine spectator expectations. Under the flickering neon lights of an open-air nightclub, an Asian man (later identified as Almayer's servant Chen), framed from behind in medium shot, walks towards the stage where a garishly dressed karaoke singer (later identified as Dain) croons away to Dean Martin's *Sway* accompanied by a group of backstage dancers. The camera cuts to the man's face, which it slowly scrutinises in close-up, and back to the performance several times, before, in counter-shot, we suddenly see him approach the singer from the back and stab him in the heart. The music grotesquely continues to blare out even after the victim has collapsed. While the other dancers hastily flee the scene, a heavily made-up young woman (later identified as Nina) pursues her automaton-like movements as if taken in a trance. The disembodied voice-over ("Nina, Nina, Dain est mort"), slow-motion effect and disjunction between the brutality of the murder and the female character's failure to react to it imbue the scene with an oneiric, hallucinatory atmosphere. The camera slowly zooms in on her, lingering on her face in close-up as she gives an arresting recital of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*.

Spectators familiar with the novel will immediately identify this powerful opening as a creative extension of the text emblematic of the wider liberties the director takes with her source. In a radical departure from the novel, where Nina's love for Dain is enshrined in her marriage, motherhood and ascension to the rank of Balinese princess, the adaptation, in a more cynical take, has her end up, in the director's own words, as "une danseuse parmi d'autres, peut-être droguée, hallucinée, dans une sorte de bordel".⁹ Her recital of Mozart's motet, a song which she has learnt during her European education, begs its own set of questions: will she find her own voice and determine her destiny now that she is free from the double influence of both her father and lover? Can the subaltern speak (to reiterate Gayatri Spivak's famous

⁹ Interview with Cyril Béghin, in booklet accompanying DVD *La Folie Almayer*, p. 9.

question)¹⁰ and does she have access to agency outside colonial and male-dominated structures of power? From the opening sequence, traditional narrative and meaning construction are suspended in favour of an ambivalent, multi-textured film narrative which refuses any closure.

In keeping with the prologue which has Nina erupt into the profilmic events and with Akerman's preoccupations as a leading exponent of feminist cinema, the main body of the film shifts the focus from Almayer, who held centre stage in the novel, to his daughter, thus giving prominence to a character that is doubly marginalised both through her race and gender. Akerman prevents any exclusive spectator identification with the father figure by elaborating on aspects of Nina's trajectory that remained unaddressed in the source text. For, even if the female point of view is explored to a certain degree in the novel, it remains subordinate to the story of Almayer. The film constructs the complex identity map of a mixed-blood descendent of Western and Eastern parents who belongs to neither culture. To use Homi Bhabha's phrase, Nina is "not quite/ not white";¹¹ she is both European and Asian, but neither fully one nor the other. Despite her education in a French boarding school where she is subjected to the processes of "normalisation" and "civilisation" that are at the heart of the colonial assimilatory project, Nina remains an outcast in French colonial as well as indigenous Malay society. Her predicament as double 'Other' is brutally summed up in the school director's verdict on her future ("Une de nous? Jamais"), ironically uttered by the disembodied voice of Akerman herself, as well as by local chief Abdulla's grim prediction for mixed-blood girls ("Elles finissent dans le ruisseau") conveyed in voice-over by Chen. The choice of an indigenous character as voice-over narrator (rather than the omniscient narrator of the novel) is in itself significant in that it counteracts the silencing of native voices under colonial rule and challenges the authority of colonial discourse. Nina's own rebellious monologue (another free invention by the director), offers insight into the flawed processes of acculturation to which she has been subjected. Forced to mindlessly regurgitate a Gallo-centric cultural heritage and to conform to rigid French codes of femininity, the

¹⁰ "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

¹¹ "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-92 (p. 92).

protracted “straightening out” of her cultural difference and Malay heritage leaves her alienated and depersonalised – an “étrangère à elle-même”, to borrow a term coined by Julia Kristeva.¹²

Nina’s plight in the hostile school environment is visualised in images of confinement ultimately more indebted to Akerman’s own imaginary – intimately linked to her family history – than to Conrad’s novel. One of the most compelling shots of the film shows her gripping the prison-like bars of the school window, blankly looking out. The prison metaphor resurfaces in the scene where the young woman avows to her father the emotional damage she has suffered as a result of her education: “Mon cœur est mort dans cette prison où j’étais enfermée”. Spectators familiar with the director’s wider œuvre will recognise Nina’s utterance as an almost *verbatim* citation from the musical comedy *Golden Eighties* (1986), where the former GI Eli (John Berry) thus relates the afflictions of the Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivor Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig). The character of Jeanne, like the protagonist of Akerman’s most famous film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), is herself modelled after the director’s mother, Natalia Akerman, whose internment in Auschwitz constitutes some kind of “primal scene” that haunts Akerman’s œuvre in many guises.¹³ If *La Folie Almayer* palimpsestically inscribes her mother’s traumatic experience, it also, as the director reveals in an interview with Laure Adler, draws on her own outsider position as a Jewish child in a Belgian Catholic school in the elaboration of Nina’s story: “Tout ce qu’elle [Nina] raconte de ce lycée, c’est de moi qu’elle parle”.¹⁴ Thus, in the particular blending between fiction and autobiography that characterises her work – a work deeply suffused with her family history and with Jewish memory more widely, which resurface in her films by way of what, after

¹² Kristeva subtly analyses the perilous mechanisms of cultural and linguistic assimilation in her seminal *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

¹³ The most obvious examples are *Jeanne Dielman* and *Demain on déménage*, which are both tributes to Natalia Akerman, but the Holocaust and the camps, as I have shown elsewhere, inform the majority of Akerman’s work including her documentaries. See my *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ “Laure Adler reçoit Chantal Akerman”, *Hors-champs*, France Culture, 12 January 2012.

Walter Benjamin, one can term “dialectical images”¹⁵ –, the director opens up Conrad’s tale of racial prejudice in 1880s Malaysia to wider questions of what it means to be the “Other” in a dominant, repressive culture. What Akerman herself calls the film’s “telluric” power seems to stem in part from its exploding of the source text’s temporal and political anchorage and the rhizomatic connections it establishes with other moments in History where cultural and racial alterity were brutally eradicated. By intertwining past and present, the particular and the collective, British colonialism and Nazi terror, the film acquires an ethical dimension that extends well beyond the book’s initial frame of reference.

As in the auto-fictional *Portrait d’une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles* (1993), which similarly centred on the emancipation of a girl shortly before a major social and political upheaval – in this case May 68 – Nina’s liberation from the shackles of a repressive, stifling education takes on the ritualistic traits of a journey: on leaving the boarding school, the young woman lets her hair down, lights a cigarette, steals fruit from a market stall, and relieves herself in a seedy alleyway. The extended sequence where she wanders the streets of Phnom Pen, shot entirely without dialogue, reaffirms the director’s position in what Deleuze has termed a “cinema of bodies”, that is, a film language that privileges the expressive functions of the body (its consistence, materiality, gestures, attitudes, positioning in space) over verbal signifiers as a powerful vehicle of human affect and emotion.¹⁶ Aurore Marion’s stubbornly determined gaze, rigid, almost hieratic bodily posture and swift-paced walk tracked by the camera “speak” the young woman’s isolation in the pulsating Asian metropolis, where, just as in the white boarding school, she remains an outsider.

Narratively and visually, both Nina and her father (a Frenchman born and bred in Malaysia), are constructed as figures of cultural alienation: wanderers between two cultures, who belong to none. The river as a transitional space *par excellence* and the boat as a vehicle of mobility – crucial tropes in Conrad’s seafarer imaginary and

¹⁵ For Benjamin, as for Akerman, the truth of an image lies in its capacity to make visible, in a dialectical process, connections between past and present. For a more detailed discussion see my *Chantal Akerman*, p. 113.

¹⁶ *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 196.

frequent signifiers in exilic cinema¹⁷ – are mobilised in Akerman’s representation of father and daughter as uprooted, nomadic characters. Symbolically poised between two shores, repeatedly shot upright on the prow of a river boat, with their silhouettes eerily cut out against the night sky, both Almayer and Nina become modern embodiments of the Flying Dutchman – the mythical figure condemned to roam the waters until love will save him from his curse. Their predicament as tragic lovers is further suggested by the overture from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* which accompanies many of the river shots. Yet if recurrent visual and aural motifs like these suggest similarities between the two characters, they nonetheless, as in the novel, fundamentally differ in their negotiation of their hybrid identities. As Harry Sewall points out with reference to Conrad’s text, Almayer’s demise ultimately stems from his “inflexible notion of who he is”,¹⁸ stubborn belief in the superiority of Western culture and ensuing contempt for indigenous cultural production and way of life. In the film, his belittling of native cultures is emblematised above all through his disdain for indigenous music to which he opposes an idealised Western classical canon: we repeatedly hear him drown out indigenous song – condescendingly referred to as “tintamarre” – by aggressively humming Chopin. Nina on the contrary “wrestle[s] with [her] identity, negotiating [her] identity from a position of strength, in relation to the dynamics of culture and the politics of power”.¹⁹ Transcending rehearsed gender and social identities, the young woman constructs her own selfhood.

In the novel, Nina’s personal struggle for emancipation is aligned with a political struggle for independence through her infatuation with Dain, who is wanted by Dutch troops for having caused the death of two of their men. In eloping with her lover she not only embraces the Eastern side of her descent, but actively propels forward Malay resistance to European colonialism. Nina herself seems largely unaware of the political stakes of her actions, unlike her mother who forcefully articulates her contempt for white men and quest for Malay self-determination:

Forget that you ever looked at a white face; forget their words; forget their thoughts. They speak lies. And they think lies because they despise us that are

¹⁷ For an excellent discussion of the tropes and stylistic characteristics of exilic and diasporic cinema see Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Sewall, “Postcolonial/Postmodern Spatiality”, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

better than they are, but not so strong. [...] When I hear of white men driven from the islands, then I shall know that you are alive, and that you remember my words.²⁰

It is equally Mrs Almayer (a character who is far more developed in the novel despite the fact that she is not given a name) who warns her daughter of the slave-like conditions of Malay women like herself and prepares her for her role as the wife of a polygamous chief. Far from painting an idealised picture of Nina's and Dain's love, the novel alludes to unbridgeable differences between them with regard to their culture, upbringing and race, ultimately questioning love's power to transcend alterity²¹ and interrogating the possibility of happiness and agency for a woman in male-dominated societies. In her adaptation, as we have already seen to a certain extent in the prologue, Akerman further undermines any notions of romantic love: Nina overtly declares that she does not love Dain (or, at least, "pas encore, pas vraiment") and only reluctantly elopes with him at her mother's behest. Her destiny as a dancer in a seedy nightclub-cum-brothel by far exceeds even the bleakest prophecies for her future in the book. As for Dain, his transformation from a Balinese prince engaged in anti-colonial struggle into a less clearly defined "rebel" and, ultimately, a ventriloquizing karaoke singer seemingly undermines the political stakes of the book. This is not to say, however, that Akerman eludes altogether the question of colonial rule that is at the heart of the novel. Rather, in tune with the wider temporal transposition that is effected in the adaptation, the horizon shifts from a colonial to a post-colonial perspective. With its dystopic vision of an entertainment industry that has completely lost touch with indigenous culture and tradition, the prologue – in all likelihood set in an independent Malaysia – makes a scathing comment on the continued influence of the West in a decolonised world. It develops concerns Akerman had already articulated in her documentary "Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai" (a contribution to the omnibus *L'Etat du monde* (2007)), which denounced the uniformity and flatness of contemporary media images. Dain's lip-synching

²⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly and Tales of Unrest* (London: J.M. Dent, 1961), pp. 150-151 and p. 152.

²¹ Cf. "He [Dain] was uneasily conscious of something in her he could not understand. [...] No desire, no longing, no effort of will, no length of life could destroy his vague feeling of their difference" (*Ibid.*, p. 187).

performance of Western chart-toppers and Nina's automaton-like dance further indict a global entertainment industry which relentlessly reproduces the same simulacra.

If in embracing the female, subaltern perspective and gesturing towards a critique of neo-colonialism the film does to a certain extent formulate a political position, it is above all in its bold avant-garde style that it converges with Conrad's refusal to adopt the dominant colonialist discourse. And it is to this formulation of an alternative cinematic language in opposition to the mainstream that we will now turn. After her venture into more commercial modes of filmmaking from the 1980s onwards, *La Folie Almayer* marks a return to a more radically experimental film language in Akerman's fictional work. In the already mentioned interview with Laure Adler, the director states that in her rewriting of the novel she was little interested in telling a story, her goal being instead to – in her own words – “parler de mon inconscient à un autre, celui du spectateur”.²² Instead of following a traditional découpage, that is, of breaking the film narrative down into a clearly defined sequence of shots, shooting was largely improvised with the director keeping a maximal receptiveness towards filmmaking as a heuristic discovery process.²³ This less controlled approach (poles apart from her adaptation of Proust which, she declares, was “travaillé au millimètre”) aligns the film with her documentary work of the last twenty years in which she experimented with a more intuitive, observational mode of filmmaking. As in her acclaimed trilogy on time and space – consisting of *D'Est* (1993), *Sud* (1999), *De l'autre côté* (2002) and *Là-bas* (2006) – shots are juxtaposed seemingly without any inherent logic. Traditional continuity editing is abandoned in favour of a more associative narrative and standard suturing devices such as shot/counter-shot are eschewed.

Concurrent with Conrad's own injection of dream-like passages of hallucination alongside passages of comparable realism in the novel, the film turns its back to verisimilitude, taking us instead into a universe of phantasmagoria, most emblematically so in the scenes where the two lovers languidly float on a canoe or hide in thick jungle terrain at the approach of a tropical storm.²⁴ In a series of tracking

²² “Laure Adler reçoit Chantal Akerman”.

²³ Interview with Cyril Béghin, p. 10.

²⁴ Another poignant example of the oneiric in the film are the images of Lingard's corpse floating in a water-filled chamber to the lamenting sounds of *Ave Verum Corpus*.

shots, the camera penetrates deeper and deeper into the maze-like vegetation, seemingly in search of the young people whose dialogue is heard off-screen, but bodies remain unseen. Reminiscent of Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), but also of F. W. Murnau's *Tabu* (1931), two films whose influence Akerman overtly acknowledges,²⁵ Nina and Dain are allegorised as stray children who will be tracked down by an authoritarian father figure. As Joachim Lepostier points out, the director also draws on the imaginary of children's and fantastic literature in her depiction of the jungle and its swamps as "des domaines dont l'abondance de recoins et de cachettes renvoie aux peurs primitives des contes".²⁶ In a visual language close to video art and making full usage of the potential of digital camera work and post-production visual and aural special effects, the rainforest with its thick overgrowth, manifold layers and stratifications, putridity and deliquescence, becomes a metaphor for the drives, desires and fears of the protagonists, a geographical map of their drifting existences and languorous passion. Whilst her fictional work up till then was intimately bound up with domesticity and the home as well as with urban spaces, in *La Folie Almayer* Akerman for the first time extensively films the outdoors in a feature film; but the atmosphere created through a combination of tracking and fixed-frame shots, dark lighting schemes, and predominantly tight shot compositions as in the wider oeuvre remains distinctly claustrophobic.

It is arguably in her treatment of nature that the influence of *Tabu*, Murnau's entrancing tale of two young lovers escaping from Bora Bora in defiance of the sexual "taboo" hanging over the girl, is most tangible. The German expressionist master's last film – the only one he shot in the Tropics –, Akerman explains, fascinated her above all for its attentiveness to the materiality of film: "Le cinéma, c'est de la matière".²⁷ Her own sensorial aesthetic in *La Folie Almayer* takes its inspiration in the expressive plasticity of silent cinema, an art form she considers purer than its later, more effect- and action-driven avatars. Even more so than in her documentary trilogy, where landscape was scrutinised as a bearer of multiple inscriptions and traces, nature here is apprehended in its full plastic potential. The humid, sticky, earthy matter of the jungle, its putrid swamps, rotting leaves and sinuous tributaries become the raw material for painterly compositions of a rare visual intensity. The lovers themselves,

²⁵ "Laure Adler reçoit Chantal Akerman".

²⁶ "Fuite et piétinements", p. 48.

²⁷ "Laure Adler reçoit Chantal Akerman".

melding with the thick jungle foliage, in their hieratic stillness, *are* pure matter, as enigmatic as the ebony goddesses of the Douanier Rousseau's exotic paintings or the stylised, hybrid figures – part human, animal and vegetal – of Wilfredo Lam.

The trance-like images of the jungle are heightened by a hallucinatory soundscape in which the humming of insects, bird cries, cracking of thunder, wind lashing the foliage, whispering echoes of children's song and litany-like, looped dialogue – all strongly reworked and distorted in post-production – combine into what one critic has called a “poème sonore”. Sound here no longer fulfils a merely narrative, illustrative function in relation to the image, but is explored for its own expressive potential in the multi-textured, synaesthetic film narrative. In the five-minute long final shot (strongly reminiscent of the ending of *Jeanne Dielman*) the chugging noise of a river boat morphs into an anthropomorphic howl, a whine that metonymically gives voice to Almayer's fossilised stillness and silence. As the shot cuts to the credit titles, even the first notes of Dean Martin's *Sway* are reworked into a menacing, lashing sound. Akerman's expressionistic use of sound in the film can be likened to that of another avant-garde director concerned with exile and displacement, the great Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, known for his surrealist soundscapes: most famously so in *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960) when the sounds of lashing brutally ring out as the ill-fated heroine apprehends that her fiancé will marry her younger sister. Like Conrad (and indeed Ghatak), Akerman lays emphasis on individuals' experience of the absurd (in the sense given to the term by Camus), that is, their contingency and thrownness into an indifferent, hostile universe where personal ambitions and aspirations are persistently thwarted. Almayer's final words, “Il y a de la boue”, not only signal his sinking into a formless, inarticulate stupor, but poignantly sum up this white man's struggle with a viscous, inhospitable environment in which he is unable to anchor himself.

Even more than the book, which opens with a flashforward, but thereafter reverts to a largely chronological narrative, the film explodes traditional plot order through the use of frequent prolepses, narrative jumps, accelerations and the repetition of visual and aural leitmotifs.²⁸ The oneiric scene of Nina and Dain hiding in the

²⁸ This breaking up of traditional plot order, more than a typically modernist device, in light of theories established by postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabba, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said can also be seen as a dismantling of the

jungle, for instance, is embedded in a sequence where Chen eavesdrops on Nina's lessons at boarding school with no more transition between them than a faint sound bridge consisting of the school children's song that is briefly carried over into the outdoor images (Chen's opium pipe vaguely signals their status as dream). Looped dialogue and sound/image disjunction imbue the scene with an uncanny atmosphere. Throughout the film, unnatural lighting, highly stylised dialogue and non-naturalistic performances destabilise the familiar conventions of realist representation. Naturally lit outdoor shots without transition cut to markedly underexposed ones, notably when the camera tracks Nina in the streets of Phnom Penh. More strikingly, the majority of indoor scenes are so dark that one can barely distinguish the characters from the contours of their material environment. In Akerman's *mise-en-scène*, Almayer's solitude and alienation quite literally taint the image with the "soleil noir" of melancholia. (Incidentally, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, one of the filmmakers with whom Akerman shares a deep affinity, used systematic underexposure to similar effect in his *Berlin Alexanderplatz* adapted from Alfred Döblin, a technique which alienated audiences when the film was first broadcast on German television in 1980). Sudden shifts from non emphatic language to cries and implorations in the dialogues (especially in Merhar's performance) as well as a marked discrepancy in the acting styles of Aurora Marion (who remains inexpressive and impenetrable throughout the film), Stanislas Merhar (melancholy and intense as in *La Captive*) and Marc Barbé (whose archetypal adventure character is rendered in a more classic diction and performance) further enhance the film's non-naturalistic aesthetic.

Akerman shows little concern for transparency or didacticism with regard to the text she adapts. Instead of dwelling on the characters' stories (which, with the exception of Nina, are far more developed in the book) or their psychological make-up, she directly homes in on their emotional tensions and conflicts. For spectators unfamiliar with the novel, it is difficult, if not impossible, to piece together any coherent picture of Almayer's background, to grasp the complex, hybridised identity of his wife or to understand the exact nature of Dain's undercover activities. The pared-down, elliptic film narrative deliberately obstructs any easy appropriation and interpretation. The relative impenetrability of the characters is part of the wider strategy of resistance that we have already identified in the *mise-en-scène* and

simplicistic notions of teleological development favoured by colonial narratives most importantly the idea of betterment through "civilisation".

narrative construction of the film. It constitutes what Edouard Glissant, the Martinican philosopher and theoretician of Poetics of Relation, terms “opacity”, that is, a respect for the indelible otherness of each and every individual and a refusal to adopt the deceptive transparency of universal models and essentialist discourses.²⁹ Glissant invites us to apprehend human beings in all their complexity and diversity without seeking to reduce them to any fixed identitarian models. In his theoretical writings, the philosopher promotes a process of “créolisation”, a term he defines as “un mouvement perpétuel d’interpénétrabilité culturelle et linguistique qui fait qu’on ne débouche pas sur une définition de l’être”.³⁰ Akerman’s re-reading of Conrad through a wealth of intertexts and (auto)biographical references (Murnau’s *Tabu*, Laughton’s *The Night of the Hunter*, the myth of the Flying Dutchman, Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, both her and her mother’s stories), in a manner akin to that proposed by Glissant, de-centres and creolises the source text. The director claims the right for adaptation to cross the original with other texts and media; to extend the source beyond frontiers, fixed temporalities, gender and cultural divisions. The transversal reading she proposes – in line with Glissant’s advocacy of relational, diagonal reading practices – opens up and renders the text more complex, rather than trying to make it transparent and understandable. Far from essentialising the Other, her avant-garde film style acknowledges and respects alterity. Akerman’s oeuvre, then, like that of Conrad before her, is shaped by an exilic sensibility which reverberates strongly in her subject matter and conception of the role and function of art. Her inspired adaptation of *Almayer’s Folly*, while converging with the novel in its rejection of simplifying essentialist discourses, also joins the author in a shared belief in solidarity and truth, a sensuous approach to art, and perhaps above all, a common desire to ‘make you hear, to make you feel, [...] to make you see.’³¹

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²⁹ For an excellent analysis of opacity as a form of resistance in Glissant’s thought see Patrick Crowley, “Edouard Glissant: Resistance and Opacity”, *Romance Studies*, 24-2 (2006), 105-115.

³⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 125.

³¹ Joseph Conrad, Preface to “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’”, in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’/ Typhoon and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 13 (emphasis original).

